

VZCZCXRO3513
RR RUEHCI RUEHDE
DE RUEHKA #1243/01 0681156
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 091156Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 5929
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO 7344
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 1012
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 8427
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 8946
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 0934
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0823

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 001243

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KOCI](#) [SMIG](#) [BG](#)

SUBJECT: A DAY WITH REPATRIATED CAMEL JOCKEYS

11. SUMMARY: Poloff visited the shelter for repatriated camel jockeys to get a sense of their pre- and post- repatriation life. Three boys talked about the difficulties they faced in the UAE, and that they were generally glad to be home, but that in many ways life continues to be difficult for them back in their homeland. END SUMMARY

12. Poloff visited the Proshanti Shelter run by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), which accommodates approximately 120 women and children who are victims of either domestic abuse or trafficking. Proshanti's most publicized residents over the last year have been the camel jockeys repatriated from the UAE. There are currently 22 camel jockeys at the shelter; 16 are preparing to return to their families, and six whose families have not yet been identified. The purpose of the visit was to interview one or two residents in depth about their experiences in Abu Dhabi or Dubai, and to compare that to their life in Bangladesh.

13. On the day of the visit, the shelter was also hosting Major Ibrahim Marzouki, Department of Juvenile Care, Abu Dhabi. Major Marzouki runs the shelter where the jockeys had stayed before returning to Pakistan, Bangladesh or Sudan. Marzouki said he was in Dhaka to follow up on his former charges and to turn over savings accounts that he had been holding in trust for many of them. According to Marzouki, these accounts held as much as 8,000 UAE dirham (approximately USD 2,200). Each parent or guardian had to show that there was now an account set up in Bangladesh so that the funds could be transferred to a responsible adult. Each boy's reintegration committee will monitor how these funds are spent.

14. Shohel and Ronnie were both around 12 years old, and said they had worked as camel jockeys for eight years. Shohel was taken to the UAE by his mother, who worked there as a school janitor. Ronnie was taken by traffickers masquerading as his parents. Shohel is an outgoing and confident young man. Ronnie was withdrawn, avoided eye contact, fidgeted, and appeared anxious. The officials at the shelter stated Ronnie is one of six boys whose parents and family members have not come forth to reclaim him.

15. Asked to describe a typical day as a jockey, the boys said they would wake up at 3:00 a.m. to begin exercising their camels at 4:00. Most days, they would groom the camel, clean the stalls, and perform other chores on the farm. They would eat small meals, and engage in strenuous exercise to maintain their low body weight. The boys described running for long periods of time while their "trainer" chased them in his automobile.

16. They would race camels two or three days a week. The

first race of the day was at 7:00 a.m. and the second at 7:00 p.m. In between races, they would care for the camel and eat their "meal" for the day -- one piece of bread. If they won, they could expect a bonus from the camel's owner and triumphant gamblers. Shohel remembered one especially large bonus that allowed him to purchase a bicycle.

¶7. Asked what happened when they didn't win, the boys displayed scars from cane beatings. They also had scars from having fallen -- or been knocked off -- during races. They added that an ambulance was always kept near the racetrack and hospitals provided free medical care to the injured.

¶8. Both boys were repatriated to Bangladesh four months ago. When asked if they were happy to be back, the boys were ambivalent. They talked about friends from Pakistan and Sudan that they miss, about how hard it was to get used to a new diet heavy on rice, and how much they have to work to understand Bangladeshi life and culture. Shohel would like to return to Dubai to work in a store, maybe someday own his own shop. Ronnie wants to study in Bangladesh and get a professional job, and, most of all, to find a home.

¶9. Rohim was repatriated about four months ago. He is 18 years old, and did not have the stunted growth and barrel chest of the other boys. He was sent to Abu Dhabi as a camel caretaker about three years ago, along with his younger mother and a broker. His mother returned to Bangladesh after two months. He is now learning to be an auto mechanic.

¶10. Rohim is happy to be back, but their return has been hard on his family. His mother is single and has two other children. She currently supports herself doing domestic

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work. While he and a brother were in Abu Dhabi, they both earned a salary of 600 dirham a month, and were able to send about half of that back to their mother. Rohim is anxious now to complete his training so he can again contribute to his family's upkeep.

¶11. Asked to compare Dhaka to Abu Dhabi, Rohim said in Abu Dhabi everything was big: tall people, high buildings, and many opportunities to earn money. In Dhaka, he said, everything seems small. Still, he is glad to be home. When told that Poloff would be writing a report to the US government about him, he said to tell the President that he is grateful to the US and Bangladeshi governments for helping him go home. He said by leaving Bangladesh, he had lost friends, an opportunity for education, and time that should have been spent in the company of his family. He was never going to get that back, but he was glad to feel like he had a future in his homeland now.

¶12. Comment: The boys made it clear that they do not want to return to their former lifestyle, where they were denied adequate food, protection and access to education. At the same time, they expressed a nostalgia for certain aspects of their former lives. The reaction of the boys to the UAE representative was a vivid display of the mixture of emotions these boys need to deal with since they have been brought home. Although a representative of the country that exploited them, the boys crowded around Marzouki, vying for his attention, and anxious to speak Arabic, the only language that some of these boys speak well. While expressing gratitude to those who had brought them home to Bangladesh, they are becoming aware of the difficulties of life here that contributed to their being trafficked in the first place.

CHAMMAS